DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 357 SO 020 551

AUTHOR Wood, Curtis W., Jr.
TITLE History for the Public.
PUB DATE Dec 88
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association (103rd, Cincinnati, OH, December 27-30, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Background; *Cultural Centers; *Cultural Education; Educational Cooperation; Educational Trends; *History Instruction; Information Services; Institutional Cooperation; State History
IDENTIFIERS *Historians; North Carolina; *Public History; Western Carolina University NC

ABSTRACT

The Mountain Heritage Center at Western Carolina University (Cullowhee, North Carolina) uses public history to educate people about southern Appalachian history and culture. The Mountain Heritage Center is a museum and research center established to collect, interpret, and disseminate knowledge about the southern Appalachian region. The Center conducts research, collects and displays artifacts, and produces its own publications, exhibitions, and demonstrations. Supported by two National Endowment for the Humanities grants, and an appropriation from the North Carolina State Legislature, the Center developed a permanent Scotch-Irish exhibit with a traveling version. The Mountain Heritage Center collaborates in the educational programs of public schools and university students, and staff members serve as consultants to various community, civic, and historical groups in designing exhibits or writing grants in pursuit of cultural goals. The center conceives, funds, designs, and builds at least one major, original exhibit each year, the planning of which frequently involves community people. Noting that the differences between academic and public history are in their deliveries and conditions of work, the Mountain Heritage Center demonstrates the collaborative nature of public history, and the diversity of work that distinguishes it from traditional academic history. (AS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED315357

AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION-- ONE HUNDRED THIRD ANNUAL MEETING, DECEMBER 27-30, 1988

Session Number 98

Title of Paper History for the Public

Author Curtis W. Wood Jr.

Affiliation Mountain Heritage Center, Western Carolina University

© Curtis W. Wood Jr.
Mountain Heritage Center
December 1988

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
CURTIS W. WOOD JR.
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 020 551

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HISTORY FOR THE PUBLIC

Curtis W. Wood Jr.
Mountain Heritage Center
Western Carolina University

My experience is not that of an historian who chose public history as a career and pursued the training for that work nor of an academic struggling to create and sustain a career in an era of oversupply. It is instead a story that I think must be increasingly common in our profession: of a traditionally trained academic historian, in a full-time university position, who chose a role in public history as a way of enriching and expanding an academic career. I have a number of things to say about the value of public history for the academic historian and about some its current problems.

I began my study of history in the early 1960s at a strong liberal arts college, drawn to the study of history for the sheer love of it. My role models were the scholar-teachers in the Wake Forest University classroom. They were academic historians devoted to teaching, to training their students in the skills of historical thinking, and to the love of learning itself. Most were fine teachers. Their research was secondary and in most cases modest.

My graduate training was in British history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in a research oriented professional program. I learned Dutch to go with my French and German and spent a year on a Fulbright grant in the Netherlands writing my dissertation in Anglo-Dutch history. I was becoming an academic specialist with some valuable research skills and a circle of useful academic connections in England and Holland. My graduate training, not surprisingly, never addressed itself to the work of a teaching scholar, though virtually everyone in the program intended to teach. In fact, I taught two years part-time and one year full time at UNC and inevitably learned a great deal, but there was seldom time to talk about teaching. By the time I finished graduate school, my perception of the professional I was about to become was of the teaching "universalist historian" who was also an academic specialist addressing his peers. How the two might meet was not clear to me. Public history, the practical application of history and the involvement of historians in the world outside the university was never considered.

I was hired at Western Carolina University in 1969, two years after this 80 year old teachers college had become a regional university in the

North Carolina university system. I was to teach freshman history and British history and to play a supporting role in the university's master's degree program in American history. Expectations at WCU were for growing enrollments in the traditional British history courses. In fact, another Ph.D. in British history was hired the same year I was. The conditions of my work soon carried me away from research and writing. Teaching loads were heavy and classes were large in my first years at Western Carolina. Most of my students were poorly prepared for college work. Many were from the Appalachian region with a cultural frame of reference that was difficult for me. I understand now that their problem with understanding academic history was not simply a problem of skills but confusion about how their own experiences as children of the southern Appalachians fitted into a larger history. At the time I was not particularly sensitive to the problem or the culture it was rooted in. From the beginning there were limited opportunities for research and modest expectations. Problems and issues of 17th and 18th century Anglo-Dutch history seemed remote. I was very much the teacher. The problems of teaching well were enormous, and I invested heavily in the search for solutions, for betters ways. Tenure came easily in the tradition of the old teachers college which had always found it difficult to attract and hold Ph.Ds.

Instead of growth, the mid-1970s witnessed falling enrollments throughout the university, particularly in history and in the number of students pursuing degrees in social science education. Survival in the 1970s and growth in the 1980s depended upon basic realignment of the university away from teacher training and towards a comprehensive regional university with new degree programs in business, health sciences and services, and technology and applied science as well as education and the liberal arts. I had arrived just in time for a great transition. As a small teachers college in a rural region, Western Carolina had always been close to the community and had a strong, pragmatic service mission. It was now searching for new ways to serve the region. Few of the new programs improved the prospects for history or the liberal arts. However an important component of this new regional service commitment was the Mountain Heritage Center.

Because of the rapid development of career oriented degree programs, there were strong prospects for retrenchment in the liberal arts. Falling enrollments and the university's changing role and mission dramatically affected what was expected of faculty. It would not be entirely fair to say that the university consciously shifted its priorities from teaching to research, but that was the practical effect from the faculty point of view. Faculty were evaluated for tenure, promotion and salary increases on the basis of teaching, research, and service. Teaching is always difficult

to evaluate; academic historians are ill equipped by experience and training to take service very seriously, so research increasingly ruled the roost. The university was in search of a new role and mission, and the faculty also found itself searching.

The fact that the history department was able to contract without retrenchment did not forestall serious efforts in the mid-1970s by the departmental faculty to find service roles and release-time funding for their research to offset falling enrollments. In fact, faculty were remarkably successful in a variety of projects, some in administrative roles, others in research and service related regional history projects such as the collection of source materials for Cherokee history and the research I became involved in. These service related projects did not solve the numbers problem, but they were responsible for opening the door for the department to become seriously involved in service sector work. Once the work of department members in regional history became known, those faculty interested in this work found numerous opportunities for service and research.

My own work in public history began with a study of the 18th and early 19th century European settlement of the southern Appalachians that focused upon the Ulster Scots or Scotch-Irish. From my first years in the southern mountains I had heard natives of the region claim Irish or Scotch-Irish ancestry. Seldom did they have even the most basic notion of what that meant nor had any historians, amateur or professional, looked beyond the surface. In the true spirit of public history, though I knew little about its theory or practice, I teamed up with a colleague in my department to survey the literature and to identify and hopefully collect source materials for the history of the Scotch-Irish migration to and settlement of the southern Appalachians. It was soon apparent that the source material for the history of the Scotch-Irish was scattered in countless family histories and in county courthouses across the eastern United States, and that a project to collect materials was impractical. But we also discovered the historians, geographers, and folklorists in Ireland, Britain and America who were studying immigration, cultural exchange and settlement in early American history.

We took our research to the university's new Mountain Heritage Center which had just opened its door on the University campus. A planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981 supported the work of transforming research into a museum exhibition. The project required all the skills of the academic historian and many new ones: research and synthesis of materials, the identification of important concepts, their expression on exhibit panels and through artifacts, consultation with scholars in Ireland and the United States, negotiation of loans from other museums, plans for a slide-tape program, a publication

and a traveling version of the main exhibit. A major grant from NEH brought our project before public audiences in 1983.

The response was remarkable from all the audiences the Mountain Heritage Center serves, particularly from the public schools. My work with the Center continued in a variety of projects, particularly those involving the continuing life of the Scotch-Irish exhibit. An appropriation from the North Carolina State Legislature turned it into the Center's only permanent exhibit complete with curricular materials, of teacher workshops, and the first of many public school class visits. The Scotch-Irish exhibit has become an integral part of the 8th grade North Carolina history curriculum in the state's 8th educational district and and the materials are currently being adapted for statewide use.

In 1985 I accepted a new half-time research position and became the first historian formally connected to the Center in a non-administrative position. Currently I teach half-time in the department of history, including a public history course in local history and genealogy, and am half time at the Center. I have primary responsibility for research on museum projects. But with a small staff of five, only three of whom are full time, we are very interdependent, and most of the work is shared. I am particularly involved in grant writing, project planning and public school programs.

The Center's short history is, I think, a dramatic example of the potential for public history across the nation and of the significant role that academic historians are playing. The Center is a museum and research center established in the late 1970s to collect, interpret and disseminate knowledge about the southern Appalachian region. It conducts research, collects and displays artifacts, and produces its own publications, exhibitions and demonstrations.

Though the Center is an integral part of the university, its work and its guiding philosophy look outward to the larger community. We serve a sparse, scattered, and diverse public. A primary constituency, both audience and resource, is the multi-cultural group for whom the region has long been home: the Cherokee, and the old white and black families. We also serve a growing retirement community and large numbers of tourists and summer residents whose curiosity about the region is accompanied by strong stereotypes.

The Center collaborates in the educational programs of public schools and university students, and Center staff serve as consultants to various community, civic and historical groups in designing exhibits or writing grants in pursuit of cultural goals. Per capita income is considerably below the national average, and financial resources are limited. The region poses difficult challenges but it offers an exciting opportunity to combine the skills and techniques of the academic historian, folklorist, media producer,

archivist, and other museum professionals and to work with people in a collaboration aimed at interpreting their history and culture.

The Southern Appalachian region has a rich historical heritage: native American, pioneer, traditional and modern. It offers a treasure of material and nonmaterial folklife that informs every project. This heritage is characterized by a complex relationship with mainstream American culture and a variety of misleading stereotypes. The region has been variously represented in popular and scholarly thought as a reservoir of pioneer toughness, an American social and economic problem, and a model of "colonialism" within America. This rich and diverse history of the southern mountains and their treasure of material and non-material folklore pose important historical questions which are currently under study by a new generation of scholars such as Ron Eller, David Whisnant, Henry Shapiro and others. We have found that many of these issues are of genuine importance and interest in the lives of the people of the region, and we have looked for ways to create dialogues about that history with the public.

The Center conceives, funds, designs, and builds at least one major, original exhibit each year. This commitment is based on our perception of the need for new research and creativity in the study and the public understanding of the southern Appalachian experience, on the remarkable new work currently being done, and on the importance of conveying this new information directly to the public in imaginative ways. Exhibit topics are also selected, in part, for their value as stimuli to a number of kinds of original research including oral history fieldwork, photography searches in private and public collections, the survey of published literature and manuscripts, and additions to the documentation and usefulness of the Center's collections. Topics are also chosen for their potential to mobilize the interests and direct involvement of our audiences, including public schools.

Planning frequently involves community people. Center exhibits usually include a multi-image nine projector slide program shown in the auditorium, a three projector traveling show, a videotape, and a publication. During the run of an exhibit, demonstrations, lectures or concerts are presented. The Center's network of friends, sources and informants is increased. Since much of value in the way of the artifacts, photographs, manuscripts and knowledge about regional topics is held by individuals and families rather than institutions, every project is very much a cooperative venture by the Center and the people of the communities it serves.

The exhibit on handwoven coverlets ("Coverlets: New Threads in Old Patterns") examined this traditional craft and the impact of the late 19th century craft revival on regional crafts and culture. Most of the 40 coverlets exhibited were loaned by local families and involved us in a close

relationship with the community, documenting and researching these beautiful artifacts. At the exhibit opening David Whisnant, author of All That Is Native and Fine, a study of the craft revival, engaged local residents and members of the handicraft movement in a discussion of the cultural issues raised by the craft revival. The coverlet exhibit is currently on national tour as a Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibit.

Our current temporary exhibit, "Mountain Trout", tells the 12,000 year old relationship of people and trout in the southern mountains, focusing on ancient Cherokee fishing practices, settlement-era food-gathering, and the environmental changes brought by railroads, logging and industry which almost destroyed the native species. It is our first major project funded primarily by private donations.

The relationship with public schools which began with the Scotch-Irish exhibit has been formalized by the Mountain Legacies project, a regional history initiative involving Center staff, university history and education faculty and public school social studies teachers. Our first undertaking was an investigation of the status and current needs of the teaching of southern Appalachian history and culture in the public schools. Among other things, the project resulted in the state eighth grade textbook being amended to include more mountain area history.

As Leslie Fishel has pointed out, "the major difference between public history and a teaching or research historian is neither knowledge nor awareness." All the skills and knowledge required by the academic historian are necessary in the practice of public history. The difference Fishel maintains is in delivery. "The public historian delivers the fruits of his research, study, field work, interpretation, ... in substantially different ways and locations from the more traditional historian." And delivery requires learning and practicing new skills.[1]

A second difference lies in the conditions of work, and here one of the most distinctive features is collaboration. Academic history is typically a most solitary and individualistic profession, in teaching as well as research and writing. Virtually all of the work of the Mountain Heritage Center is collaborative. This is true of the historical research and writing as it is of the preparation of an exhibit or a slide-tape presentation. The opportunities for creativity and productivity are great, but the historian is constantly involved in a give-and-take with the administrative director, curator, and folklorist, not to mention community people and public school teachers. And it's always necessary to share the credit. The historian's name appears on the credits but as a member of a team, rarely alone.

These differences make public history distinctive and create possibilities that don't exist in academic history. They are also responsible for the resistance and disapproval that academic historians feel toward public history. Collaborative work for public audiences simply does not

have the respect and prestige of specialized academic research in the eyes of academic historians. Working in both worlds has made this obvious, particularly at the time of annual faculty evaluations.

The rewards have more than offset the frustrations. The diversity of the work and the opportunities it offers represent a sort of ideal for modern academic life. They bring together the modern academic triad of teaching, research and service in an effective and meaningful way. Papers and publications are an almost spontaneous by-product of Center projects which are first and foremost public and visual. Most exhibits lead to a publications, which are cast for both public and academic audiences. Center staff annually read papers at conferences like the Appalachian Studies Conference or the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society and publish in related journals. The contents of these reports to our academic colleagues on new research are at the same time appearing before public audiences. As with our other work, most of these papers and articles are collaborative. Nonetheless it is this aspect of my public history work that is most readily understood and evaluated by my colleagues.

I give talks to public school students from kindergarten through high school in their classrooms and in our galleries. I talk to community groups and public school teachers and conduct occasional seminars for NCCAT. I teach six hours each semester, both introductory, upper level and graduate courses. Recently I have been able to carry my professional experience directly into the classroom by teaching an upper level undergraduate/ graduate methods course on local history and genealogy. In fact three of the four public history courses in the department's curriculum are taught by members of the Center staff. This and our masters degree with a public history concentration indicates a newly won status for public history.

Working with such diverse groups of learners of all ages and with the many ways of delivering history has carried back into the college classroom in more fundamental ways. It has given me an understanding of the life experiences of my Appalachian students and has helped me to place the traditional college age group in a developmental context. Working with olders learners has strengthened that essential conviction that what is learned now will be valued more in the future. Above all there is the sheer pleasure, enjoyed too seldom by historians, of writing and teaching history for audiences that are enthusiastic and appreciative and for whom what you say or write matters, who recognize their own lives in what you offer them.

My experience with public history has been a continuing dialogue between a public keenly interested in their past and an academic community in the midst of significant and often exciting research. To bring these two together is one of the great privileges of the public historian.

[1] Leslie H. Fishel Jr., "Public History and the Academy," in Public History: An Historical Introduction, ed. by Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1986), p. 11.